

Exploring distributed leadership in an English university. (0278)

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## **Introduction**

Now, more than ever, higher education institutions in the UK and elsewhere are reflecting on the need for effective leadership models which enable individual members of staff, their departments and the institution as a whole to adapt to a quickly changing academic environment ([Flumerfelt and Banachowski 2011](#), [Osseo-Asare, Longbottom, and Chourides 2007](#), [Randall and Coakley 2007](#), [Holt et al. 2014](#)).

Even more fundamentally, institutions are being challenged to consider their own nature and purpose in the modern era ([Bolden, Gosling, and O'Brien 2013](#)): what might being an 'authentic university' ([Barnett 2011](#)) mean at a time when institutions are both businesses with an international market, and organisations with a global mission to extend knowledge through both research and teaching?

This paper examines these issues through the prism of the findings of a study funded by the Leadership Foundation for HE which explored how one institution had responded to the ever changing higher education climate by implementing a newly conceived 'distributed' leadership model. This involved appointing 130 academics to the position of Academic Lead (AL) throughout the university, a role which was to provide leadership and support to a small group of individual academic colleagues in their subject grouping. While the notion of distributed leadership has been explored widely in school leadership research ([Mayrowetz 2008](#), [Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2007](#), [Woods et al. 2004](#)), it has been less widely applied to research

exploring the higher education sector ([Bryman 2009](#)). Specifically, this study aims to address the following research questions (RQs):

- How do Academic Leads describe and understand their experiences of being in the role?
- What is the subsequent impact of taking on these new roles on their academic identities and core value systems?

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Distributed leadership***

Underpinning the concept is a recent paradigm shift in viewing leadership practice in organisations as being shared across an institution or group rather than being undertaken or 'owned' by one person. Bolden *et al.* ([2008, 258](#)) explain in relation to higher education:

...the HE sector in the UK is increasingly espousing the practice of 'distributed leadership'...whereby leadership is conceived of as a process dispersed across the organization (within systems, activities, practices and relationships) rather than residing within the traits, actions and/or capabilities of 'leaders' in formal positions.

### ***The nature and purpose of higher education***

Also underpinning this study are philosophical questions about the purpose of higher education. Is a modern day research-intensive university a business, whose first priority is to maximise outputs, or should its organisational shape reflect first and foremost the characteristics and values of a research and learning community? Barnett ([2011](#))

argues that traditionally the 'idea' of the university stood for the 'highest realisation of human being', but that there has been a 'recent lurch in the directions of the entrepreneurial university and the corporate university' ([318](#)). Yet, for all the political and economic imperatives for an institution to succeed *as* a business, the university 'retains pools of autonomy' ([273](#)) and can make choices with respect to its direction of travel. Within this context:

A task of university leadership, accordingly (and unlike university 'management'), is that of infusing a university with energy, with spirit. ([Barnett 2011, 315-316](#))

Crucially, though, any re-framing of leadership within an institution conveys a set of values about what that institution's purpose is, and how its academic leaders – and 'followers' - are positioned within that organisation. Does a particular leadership approach 'infuse ... with energy', or does it aim to 'manage' academic work and productivity? Can it do both?

## **Methods**

We used an exploratory, sequential mixed methods design ([Cresswell 2014](#)). In stage one, we conducted qualitative research undertaking interviews with 15 Academic Leads (ALs) and 15 Assigned Academics (AAs) - that is, academics who had been assigned to Academic Leads - about their experiences and perceptions of the role. The sample contained male (ALs = 9; AAs = 8) and female (ALs = 6; AAs = 7) staff with a range of ages, levels of experience and discipline backgrounds.

In stage two we undertook a survey of all academic staff (n=1034) using an online questionnaire (Bristol On-Line Surveys) which was based on themes and issues

emanating from the first stage of the project. In total 177 people completed the survey giving a response rate of 17.1%. The survey was completed by 42 academic leads (17 female and 25 male) which represents 32% of all ALs, and 135 assigned academics (69 female and 66 male) which represents just over 12% of academic staff at the University. The results of the survey were analysed and cross-tabulated to compare data from those who were academic leads with those who were assigned academics.

### **Findings and Implications**

This study suggests that the challenge of 'distributed leadership' in research-intensive universities is complex on a number of levels: the plurality of the institutional mission, which includes both research and education, in a rapidly changing international context; the diversity of possible leadership/management roles, ranging from 'line management' to mentoring; the challenge of effective communication in a large, complex organisation; and the effects of traditional academic values and identities, which may support but may also be antithetical to the strategic direction of the institution.

Distributing leadership has advantages in providing immediate support for academics, but this study suggests that institutions may need to consider carefully a number of questions:

1. Are the purposes, values and strategic direction of the institution clearly articulated, particularly in relation to its expectations for academic staff?
2. Are the 'academic leadership' role profiles clearly articulated and transparent to all, particularly in relation to whether 'academic leads' are line managers *or* mentors, and where lines of accountability lie?

3. Do internal communications meet the needs of a diverse institution?
4. Do institutional practices provide time and opportunity for open discussion about the nuances of, and potential contradictions in, the values and goals of the institution, for example through regular one-to-one, team or departmental meetings?
5. Does the institution have a clear strategy for evaluating and enhancing its leadership structure, processes and practices?

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